

Who Are the Rohingyas? by Dr. Aye Chan

A few weeks ago, it was announced on a broadcast of BBC Burmese program that a Burmese national of the Rohingya ethnic group had been granted political asylum in Japan. We should be pleased with this sign of the Japanese government's humanitarian attitude towards people who could face various kinds of dangers in their homeland, including death, regardless of their race, religion or nationality. However what concerns me in this case, as a native historian of Burma, is the ethnicity of the so-called Rohingyas. Who are the Rohingyas? This issue has been a problem for Burma since it gained independence from Great Britain.

The person who was granted asylum in Japan is Mr. Zaw Min Htut, the author of a book titled "The Union of Burma and Ethnic Rohingyas," published in Japan in 2001. The book deals with the history of the so-called Rohingya people of Arakan State, presently called Rakhine State, in the Union of Myanmar. An article of mine was given special reference in his book. However, I am not happy with the way it was referred to. Zaw Min Htut has clearly abused the academic platform for political purposes, producing a false picture of the Arakanese history. The bizarre phenomenon created by Zaw Min Htut and his precursors is the literary wing of the political scheme that aims at changing the northwestern part of Arakan(Rakhine) State of Union of Myanmar, the original homeland of Arakanese (Rakhine) people into the Rohingya State.

In this article, I want to discuss whether the Rohingyas are an indigenous ethnic group of Burma or not. Being a scholar, I want to handle this matter without any prejudice or misconception. In this regard, I can confidently say that there has never been such an ethnic group throughout the history of Burma. The people called Rohingyas by Zaw Min Htut and his mentors are direct descendents of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal (present day Bangladesh). The British colonial officials called them Chittagonians in their administrative records. They migrated into Arakan after the province was ceded to British India under the terms of Treaty of Yandabo concluded at the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1826. Most of them settled down in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw Districts of Arakan State, the frontier areas near Burma's border with Bangladesh. This, of course does not mean that they do not deserve the equal rights that the other ethnic groups of Burma should enjoy regardless of whether or not democracy is restored in the country.

Probably Zaw Min Htut is an activist of younger generation. However, the movement of his precursors brought great bloodsheds to Arakan in the wartime and the opening decade of independent Burma. Some Arakanese people of that region in their early seventies and eighties have still not forgotten the atrocities they suffered in 1942 during the short period of anarchy between the British evacuation and the Japanese occupation of the area. For all these public disorders experienced by both of the Arakanese Buddhists in the western frontier and the Muslims in the Arakan proper (Mark-U and Kyauktaw townships), I certainly feel much reasonable to blame British Governor Sir Dorman Smith's colonial administration for arming those Chittagonians in frontier area as the volunteer forces to deter the Japanese incursions and create a buffer between the Japanese occupied Burma and British India. An intelligence report said that the volunteers, instead of fighting the Japanese, destroying the Buddhist monasteries and pagodas, massacred thousands of innocent Arakanese civilians. It also expressed the grave concern among the authorities of British administration in exile about the holocaust of Arakanese community in the western fringe of Burma by those Chittagonians [British Library: IOR : B/8/9].

The Arakanese folk in rural areas again became the victims of the rebellion which those intrusive settlers launched against the Union of Burma in the 1950s. These innocent Arakanese people faced killing, kidnapping, arson, plunder and rape for a decade after the independence. We should recall what the great archeologist Emile Forchhammer, seeing the persistent flights of the immigrants from the adjacent areas of the British India, predicted: " This land of strange prophesies, Arakan, the Palestine of the Farther East." [Forchhammer: 1892: 1]

If Zaw Min Htut calls his work a history, he seems to be a poorly trained historian. He not only lacks knowledge of research methodology but also knowledge of the background history of Southeast Asia. He does not seem to have learned about the Indianization of Southeast Asia nor that there were some dynasties in Southeast Asia, who assumed Indian titles, for instance the Varman dynasty in Cambodia, the Vikrama and Varman dynasties in the Irrawaddy Valley of Pre-Pagan Burma, and the Chandra dynasty in Arakan in the first millennium of Christian era. He is completely ignorant of folk migrations that have taken place in the Southeast Asia since the pre-historic times. The forerunners of the Tibeto-Burman races arrived in the Irrawaddy Valley around the beginning of the Christian era and some of them entered the Arakan coastal strip. The presence of Tibeto-Burman races, such as the Chakma in the Chittagong Hill Tract of modern Bangladesh and the Tripuris (known as Mrun to the Arakanese) in Tripura State

in modern India, is a proof of the waves of ethnic migration from central Burma to the Arakan coast and then to the northeastern parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Furthermore Zaw Min Htut does not know how epigraphy and paleography affords conclusive evidence that northern Arakan owes its Buddhist and somewhat Hindu traditions to India. At the same time, there is strong presumption that southern Arakan had cultural contacts with the states of Irrawaddy Valley or perhaps even farther eastward to Dvaravati [Paul Wheatly: 1983:184]. The Pyu inscriptions found in Sandoway District and the silver coins of Chandra dynasty found everywhere in Arakan State demonstrate the close cultural and ethnic relationships of the inhabitants of Arakan in Dynnyawaddy and Wethali periods (c. AD 400-1000) with their cousins in the contemporary Irrawaddy Valley. There are four Sanskrit stone inscriptions datable to the AD fourth to tenth centuries found in Arakan, and all of them tell about the Buddhist rituals and ceremonies performed by the people of nobility and gentry. The elite groups of the old Arakan, like those of other Indianized kingdoms of mainland and island Southeast Asia used Sanskrit as court language.

Zaw Min Htut's book attempts to prove that the so-called Rohingyas are the descendants of Arab castaways from shipwrecks on the Arakan coast in the ninth century and that they had been inhabitants in Arakan at least two centuries before the Arakanese people of Tibeto-Burman family reached Arakan. This illogical speculation is based on an account of the Arakanese chronicle, written by Sara Nga Mei in 1826 [Nga Mei: 1826:so-ob 5-8; so-re 1-5]. Following the chronicle, R.B.Smart, the Deputy Commissioner of Akyab District, wrote that in the ninth century several ships were wrecked on Ramree Island and the Muslim crews placed in the villages in Arakan [R.B.Smart: 1957:86]. Other chronicles also tell the story of some shipwrecks; however none of them say that the crews were Arabs or Muslim. The word for Arab and Persian in archaic Burmese and Arakanese is Pathi. The chroniclers do not say that there were any Pathis (Arabs or Persians) sent to Wethali, the capital city of Arakan, or that they were allowed to build mosques for their community. All these sentences, plus the word "Arab castaways," and the statement that those Arabs were allowed to settle down in Wethli were intentionally added by Zaw Min Hut and his precursor, Ba Tha, one of the Rohingya storytellers [Ba Tha : 1964].

In the field of research methodology, he does not seem to grasp the importance of primary sources of information in historical research. Although he does give reference to some works of the authorities on Burmese history, his way of quoting from scholarly writings shows an explicit insincerity. In his bibliography, either the date of publication or the title of the article or the name of the publisher is not given for some works. Furthermore, his style of writing is logically weak, for while he confidently asserts that the language spoken by the Rohigya people is similar to the Bengali and Sanskrit, linguistically of the Indo-Aryan languages family, he cannot bring forward any linguistic affinities of their language with the Semitic languages that Arabic belongs to.

Altogether eight paragraphs from one of my articles were excerpted in his book with a forwarding statement that he was citing an original text of mine [Aye Chan: 1975:56-7]. However, when I carefully examined them, I found that he dropped some sentences of mine and substituted them with his own, using them to draw a conclusion that the people whom he called Rohingyas had been the earlier settlers of the Mayu Frontier area in the northwest Arakan, namely present day Buthidaung and Maungdaw Districts. My research presented in that article had nothing to do with the migration of the Bengali people from

Chittagong District of modern Bangladesh into Arakan. The intent of my article was to examine the fall of Wethali dynasty in the last decades of the tenth century.

If Zaw Min Htut asks me about the people of Old Arakan in the Dynnyawaddy and Wethali Periods (c.A.D.400-1000), I will answer with certainty that they were of Mongoloid stock, not very distant cousins of the Pyus of Irrawaddy Valley. Every student of Burmese history knows that the Anandachandra Inscription in Sanskrit is the only source of Arakanese chronology before the Lemro period (AD1018-1406) and also that the information and list of the kings of the Dynnyawaddy and Wethali dynasties given by the chronicles contain much legend and are not reliable for historical research. This is because the tradition of writing chronicles began in the early eighteenth century, and most of the works of Arakanese chroniclers were brought to the Burmese capital, Amarapura after the Burmese conquest of the country in 1784. The numismatic evidences have proved the reigns of some kings of the Chandra dynasty as mentioned by the inscription in the later half of the AD first millennium. The sculptural scrutiny of leading archeologists and art historians has proved that the earliest inhabitants of Arakan were of Mogoloid stock [Pamela Gutman: 2001:5]. The other sources we can rely for the study of early Arakanese history are the Buddhist pagodas, the Buddha images, and the variety of artifacts thus far unearthed. Unfortunately no archaeological evidence to prove the presence of the Muslim community in Arakan prior to the beginning of the fifteenth century has been found yet.

However, I do not mean there was no Muslim community in Arakan before the state was absorbed into British India. Some Bengali retainers of King Saw Mun (r.1430-1433) who regained the throne with the military aid from Sultanate of Bengal were allowed to settle down in the suburban area of Mark-U, the new royal capital. They were the earliest Muslim settlers who do not seem to count many. There had been a minor Muslim presence mostly made up of Muslim mercenaries, itinerant merchants from Persia and Golkonda and some Bengali captives of the Arakanese and Portuguese pirates sold into slavery. The descendants of those people can be found in the vicinity of Royal capital Mark-U and Kyauktaw Township. [R.B. Smart: 1957: 87] Professing the Islamic faith, they have lived in Arakan since the early seventeenth century, where their way of life pertains to their lands of origin. Speaking Arkanese dialect, they never claim themselves being Rohingyas. They want to be called themselves Arakanese Muslims.

It is obvious that the term "Rohingya" was created in 1950s by the educated Chittagonian descendants from Mayu Frontier area (present day Buthidaung and Maungdaw Districts) and that it cannot be found in any historical source materials in any language till then. The creators of that term might be of the second or third generations of the Bengali immigrants from the Chittagong District in modern Bangladesh. R.B. Smart wrote:

"Since 1879, immigration has taken place on a much larger scale and the descendants of the slaves are resident, for the most part in the Kyauktaw and Mohan [Mark-U] townships. Maungdaw township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the district [R.B. Smart: 1957: 87].

It is not a painstaking work to write a well documented piece of research on the migration of those Chittagonians into Arakan State in the nineteenth century. Plenty of primary source materials are available at the Oriental and India Office Collection at British Library in London, Department of National Archives in Rangoon, and the Rangoon University Central Library. It will be my pleasure to help with some source materials from my own collection if Zaw Min Htut and his colleagues want to rewrite the history of their people with the objective reality. If they stubbornly refuse to accept the truth I am ready for a debate in the publicity.

Aye Chan

(ayechan@kanda.kuis.ac.jp)